

INTERSTICE

A Thesis Submitted to the
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
In the Department of Art and Art History
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

By

ADRIAN GOLBAN

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Abstract

Situated at the intersection of my past and present art practice, this thesis explores interstitial (or intervening) spaces: a place of “in betweenness,” a place one enters when transitioning from an old life to a new. The thesis addresses the role of memory in my experience of an interstitial space as I was establishing a dual Romanian-Canadian cultural identity in the art world. In my interstice story, I am both actor in and spectator of my quest to reconcile conventional and alternative media and past and present art practice. Ultimately, my quest is one of self-acceptance where I have reshaped my artistic identity in the contemporary milieu.

My thesis exhibition includes ten sculptures in varied sizes, including self-portraiture. These sculptures use two approaches to reveal metaphoric alterations of my inner self. The first approach is formal, depicted through realistic clay portraiture. The formal approach speaks to my skills in academic methods learned in art schools in Romania. These methods are seen in my manipulation of the material and in the figurative aspect of the work. The second approach is more conceptual, revealed in recyclable clay, wooden scraps, and found objects that indirectly allude to consumption. This approach uses memory and dual identity to reveal the investigation of the self-persona and to create an imaginary link between my past and present art practice. For instance, *Objects-Talismen* bring emotions and familiarity from the past into the present, reconnecting my current life with my former life. In one sculpture, called *I am Ro-maniac: Refilling my Memories*, I am represented as a humorous figure with a funnel protruding from its head. The funnel speaks to my need to refill my memories—to never forget where I came from. Another sculpture, *The Self-(Re) Built from Scraps*, alludes to layers of memories that comprise who I am. My “interstitial place” is a transitional space where I have struggled to repossess my identity in dislocated circumstances and where I have grown to understand this new identity situated between two art worlds, between past and present, between old and new.

Acknowledgements

In my MFA journey, many people inspired and guided me. I would first like to thank my supervisor, Susan Shantz, whose expertise was instrumental in helping me to express my ideas. Susan's insightful feedback brought my artwork to a higher level. Without her, this thesis would have never been completed. I would also like to express my gratitude to my committee: Jennifer Crane for instilling in me a love for historical process in photography; Joan Borsa for the opportunity to discover another side of myself, Tim Nowlin for his encouragement and constructive feedback, and Alison Norlen for her friendship and support. Additionally, I would like to thank the following people for their dedication to the program and helpful advice: Lisa Birke, Marcus Miller, Allyson Glenn, John Graham, and Jon Bath. As well, I owe a debt of gratitude to Jake Moore and Oliver Friesen for their support in the realization, advertising, and documentation of my exhibition.

Thank you, as well, to the staff of the College of Arts and Science and the Art and Art History Department, particularly Nadine Penner, Joseph Anderson, Barbara Reimer, and Todd Lyons for their support. Finally, I would like to thank Heather McWhinney and Anastasia Scherders, who edited and proofread my thesis.

My acknowledgements would not be complete without thanking my family. My son, Thomas, who despite being in Romania and experiencing disruptions to our regular online discussions, was steadfast in his support. My parents and siblings also provided moral support. My wife, Manuela Ioana Golban encouraged and supported me. My stepdaughter, Alexandra Valentina Chertez, provided the raw material for *The Mudbrick Relic*, and my daughter, Adda Freya, patiently put up with a father who was virtually absent and behaved more like a guest in our home over these last few months.

Dedication

To my parents, Constantin and Eugenia Golban, for inspiring me throughout their life and work,
and for believing in me.

Table of Contents

Permission to Use	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Dedication	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures.....	vi
1. Introduction.....	1
2. National and Artistic Background	2
3. Transition to MFA Graduate Program	5
4. <i>Interstice</i> , MFA Thesis Exhibition	13
4.1. Objects-Talismen	14
4.2. Present Self and Multiple Selves	15
4.3. The Vessel of Thoughts and The Dacian	18
4.4. Self-(Re) Built from Scraps	23
4.5. The Self-Dislocated	24
4.6. I am Ro-maniac: Refilling my Memories	26
4.7. The Three Selves.....	28
4.8. The Mudbrick Relic	30
5. Conclusion	32
Works Cited.....	33
Appendix.....	35

List of Figures

All photos by Adrian Golban unless otherwise indicated

Figure 1. Adrian Golban, <i>Emotional Baggage</i> , 2017. Mixed-media. Snelgrove Art Gallery, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	6
Figure 2. Adrian Golban, <i>Emotional Regime</i> , 2016. Mixed-media. Installation/Performance. Snelgrove Art Gallery, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	6
Figure 3. Adrian Golban, <i>The Sputnik</i> , 2019. Found object. Sculpture/Installation. Studio space view.	9
Figure 4. Adrian Golban, <i>Inside of My Bicycle</i> , 2019. Photograms: caffenol developer. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	10
Figure 5. Adrian Golban, <i>The Dog-Lamp</i> , 2020. Found object, wax, motion sensor. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	12
Figure 6. Adrian Golban, <i>Objects-Talismen</i> , 2021. Loom heddle, fragment of wooden rake, and rusty nails. Personal collection of inherited objects.	15
Figure 7. Adrian Golban, <i>Present Self</i> , 2021. Plasticine, foam, and wood. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	16
Figure 8. Adrian Golban, <i>Multiple Selves</i> , 2021. Cone 022, 015 fired clay and sawdust, 12 x 90 x 30 in. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	17
Figure 9. Adrian Golban, <i>Multiple Selves</i> , 2021. Cone 022, 015 fired clay and sawdust, Detail.	18
Figure 10. Adrian Golban, <i>The Vessel of Thoughts</i> , 2021. Wooden scraps and stoneware, 80 x 27 x 10 in. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	19
Figure 11. Adrian Golban, <i>The Dacian</i> , 2021. Stoneware and wooden scraps, 96 x 32 x 23 in. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	21
Figure 12. Adrian Golban, <i>The Dacian</i> , 2021. Stoneware and wooden scraps. Detail. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	22
Figure 13. Adrian Golban, <i>Self-(Re) Built from Scraps</i> , 2021. Stoneware and wooden scraps, 96 x 10 x 10 in. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	23

Figure 14. Adrian Golban, <i>Self-Dislocated</i> , 2021. Stoneware and wood scraps, 20 x 13 x 10 in. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	25
Figure 15. Adrian Golban, <i>I am Ro-maniac: Refilling my Memories</i> , 2021. Found object, wood, and stoneware. Detail. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	26
Figure 16. Adrian Golban, <i>I am Ro-maniac: Refilling my Memories</i> , 2021. Found object, wood, and stoneware, 60 x 15 x 12 in. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	27
Figure 17. Adrian Golban, <i>The Three Selves</i> , 2021. Stoneware, decorative wall painted, 24 x 10 x 13 in. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	29
Figure 18. Adrian Golban, <i>The Mudbrick Relic</i> , 2021. Lilic twigs, mudbrick, calcium carbonate, iron oxide. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.	31

1. Introduction

Using a range of found objects and materials, *Interstice* builds on the associations embedded in their physical presence and symbolic potential to reveal my trust and enthusiasm for the ways in which my memory, diasporic identity, and current realities are being integrated into an evolving sculptural language. I am an artist from Romania who has lived in Canada for almost a decade, since 2012. My art training in Romania was traditional with strong support for figurative and formal methods of making sculptures and an emphasis on technical skills; I completed my BFA in 1997 at Academy of Visual Arts “Ioan Andreescu” in Romania. Since then, I have worked primarily in sculpture. My work was exhibited widely in Romania and across Europe for fifteen years, at which time I was also teaching at the “Aurel Popp” Arts High School in Satu-Mare. When I moved to Canada, I discovered new approaches to making art and determined that I wanted to complete an MFA degree here and broaden my opportunities in Canada. During my MFA program, I encountered different approaches to making art with less emphasis on technical skill and expertise and more on experimentation and the use of found objects. I have had to adapt my working methods and now primarily express myself with found and everyday materials, including photography and video, as well as clay, which I sometimes use as a substitute for wood, stone, and bronze.

This transition has posed many challenges and opportunities, leading me to assume the role of a visual actor—a player—who freely jumps from one idea to another to give me the satisfaction of the new and to feed my curiosity about the unknown. For me, the MFA program at the University of Saskatchewan has been an artistic environment where learning emerges from mistakes, allowing me to experiment with new ideas and find my own path. It has been a place where I could ask, Who am I? One of the directions of contemporary art that has interested me is a focus on signifiers of identity, a suitable niche in which to combine my traditional skills in a contemporary milieu. *Interstice* reveals how I occupy the gap between national and artistic identities. It is a show of literal and metaphorical self-portraits that combine memories and experiences specific to my life in Romania and my experiences in Canada. In creating this work, I have rediscovered my voice in a new place.

2. National and Artistic Background

As a sculptor trained in Romania, my art background emphasized prescriptive, figurative traditions and technical proficiency. I did not, however, set out to be an artist. My early exposure to art was happenstance and, in those days, I approached art as a hobby. As a child, I was sickly and sensitive and hospitalized several times. My first interaction with art was just before going to a hospital, in a library where I found a book about Romanian Byzantine Monasteries. This book was my entrance into the art world. My favorite subjects in school, along with biology and anatomy, were music and art, and I always loved singing, dancing, and drawing. In high school, at a technical school called Liceul Agricol Dragalina, I discovered my passion for making things. I learned how to disassemble and assemble tractor engines, make small industrial parts, and follow blueprints (which I learned how to do in the technical drawing class). On reflection, I wonder if my prescriptive method for making art has its roots in my high-school training. During math classes, and in other subjects that I did not like, I carved miniature statues in chalk, mimicking the ancient statues in marble of the Greeks Kouros and Kore. At home, I carved portraiture in plaster bricks. In grade eleven, I decided to take an art class at the folk-art school in Calarasi, the capital of the province. There, I met the painter Corneliu Ratcu, my first art instructor. However, at that time, art was only a hobby for me.

This hobby developed during my one year and four months in the army (between 1986 and 1988). I was a chef, and between preparing the meals, I carved in soap portrait reliefs of my fellow soldiers and officers to give to them as gifts. After the army, I faced a dilemma: Should I work in my home village in a factory to which I had been assigned by the Communist regime? Or should I do something else to “find myself”? I began to wonder if art was more than a hobby. I chose a middle path and moved to Bucharest to enroll in a qualifying school for Romanian railways, just to have a temporary job in the capital. I also signed up for a three-year art program (1988–1991) at the “Scoala Populara de Arta” (a folk-art school), where I discovered another artistic world through my first contact with clay, plaster, and Greek study molds. The school became my second job, my second home. After I graduated, I needed to determine if this passion could become a profession.

Although I had well-paid work with Romanian railways, I was ready to give up the job for my dream. In my last year with the railway, I travelled all over the country and had the chance to visit Moscow and the Hermitage in St. Petersburg—my first trip across the Romanian border—which opened new horizons for me in the arts and gave me a taste for travel. Then, despite my father's advice to the contrary, I applied to the Academy of Visual Arts “Ioan Andreescu” in Cluj-Napoca without his knowledge or consent. I wanted to find out for myself if I was good enough to become a professional artist. If I failed the entrance exam, no one would know. But I passed the exam and rewarded myself with my first flight. I travelled from Cluj-Napoca to Bucharest and then to my home village, where I told my family my news. After I told my father, he went to the bodega in the village and bought drinks for everyone in my honour. It was a celebration for my family, and an unexpected and happy surprise.

While living in Romania, I had access to studio facilities and art communities where figurative sculpture, casting, and carving were easily supported and accommodated. This art pedagogy was informed by nineteenth-century academic methods of teaching, mainly in the first three to four years of study, followed by a more modernist direction in the last two years. However, both methods were old-fashioned, as art writer Thierry de Duve observes:

Two models, even though in reality they contaminate each other, divide up the teaching of art conceptually. On the one hand, there is the academic model; on the other, there is the Bauhaus model. The former believes in talent, the latter in creativity. The former classifies the arts according to techniques, what I would call the *métier*; the latter according to the medium. The former fosters imitation; the latter invention. Both models are obsolete.¹

The teaching method in Romania emphasized the human figure and was characterized by realism as a basis for the development of the artist. I now realize that the academic environment in which I worked as a student in Romania was not in step with what was happening elsewhere in the contemporary art world. My art history education was stuck in the 1950s, and there was a sense of living at the periphery of the art world. While I was required to study the classics, outside—in the real world—artists were facing new post-communist art movements. For instance, one of

¹ Thierry de Duve, “When Form Has Become Attitude – And Beyond,” in *The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context* (Southampton, UK: John Hansard Gallery, 1994), 22.

these movements, neo-orthodoxism, saw a cluster of Romanian artists using political and religious themes to challenge institutional religion. As Romanian curator of contemporary art, Maria Asavei argued, “These [were] religious/spiritual forms of artistic expression where the artists attempting to self-cultivate new identities from the bottom-up are doubled by another category of artistic production that uses the religious image and symbols in a defamiliarized way.”²

While this art movement was happening in my own country, my pedagogical training was in the classical, mimetic form of sculpture, “an acquisition of skills ... under specific cultural constraints”³ as art writer Thierry de Duve has noted. The cultural constraints in Romania in the 1990s, when I was a student, were still informed by Russian socialism—realism, with a timid imitation of Western modernism, which reluctantly began to gain space in the academic milieu. Consequently, it was in this first “interstitial space” (between two directions in art) that I found myself as an artist: in the departure from communist-realism to what would become the new academic art orientation of modernism.

My life in the art world had begun. Art had become more than a hobby. I discovered new doors to the unknown that I needed to open. I am a curious person by nature, and I was eager to learn more about art. While my Romanian art training was quite academic and traditional by Canadian standards, I also found that art is a maze—a time and space—you can get lost in and return to the same point where you started. The maze can also be an invention for escape and a refuge from a world I do not belong to—a world of politics, manipulation and money. My MFA thesis exhibition, *Interstice*, is my response to where I came from and where I now find myself. Centered in two cultures—Romania and Canada—the MFA is about a world I have created for myself. Art is no longer either a hobby or a profession: it is my way of living, a path to myself.

² Maria Alina Asavei, (2020) “Art as Resistance to the 'Religious Affair' and Consumerist Religion in Post-Communist Romania,” in *Art, Religion and Resistance in (Post-)Communist Romania: Nostalgia for Paradise Lost*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, (2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56255-7_9.

³ Thierry de Duve, “When Form Has Become Attitude – And Beyond,” in *The Artist and the Academy: Issues in Fine Art Education and the Wider Cultural Context* (Southampton, UK: John Hansard Gallery, 1994), 19.

3. Transition to MFA Graduate Program

When I arrived in Saskatoon, Canada, I encountered different approaches to making art, with less emphasis on technical skill and expertise and more on experimentation and the use of found objects. Soon after moving, I went to Calgary to introduce myself to art galleries, going door to door with my portfolio. Finally, a gallery owner told me, “Your work is too traditional. I cannot display it in my gallery.” I was shocked, confused, and lost. I felt like I had learned nothing during all those years I spent in university in Romania. I questioned my experience as an artist; I was at a crossroads.

To find out about this new world of art, I decided to do a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree at the University of Saskatchewan. Initially, I participated in senior art classes as a Visiting Research Student (VRS), using found objects as well as video and performance to explore ideas related to my past. The resulting artworks are visual political statements about the communist society I lived in, viewed through the lens of dislocation and cultural shock. For example, in one mixed-media installation (*Emotional Baggage*), I built a suitcase that is a replica of one I had in the Romanian army. Inside the suitcase is a paper shredder activated by a motion sensor. When the paper is shredded, memories and traumas associated with my experiences of the army and communism in Eastern Europe are symbolically and momentarily severed. *Emotional Baggage* (Fig. 1) brings in new elements, like memory and identity, which foreshadow the concerns about dual identities that inform my MFA thesis exhibition. Baggage is literally the suitcase, but also customs and social rules, old habits, and predetermined ideas about art theory and concepts. Through this metaphorical act of “shredding memories,” I am discarding preconceptions about making art and opening myself to what the contemporary world has to offer me.

Emotional Regime (Fig. 2), a video-performance installation that I also completed as a VRS, contains visual information from the 1989 Romanian revolution. For this work, I built a plywood stand into which I inserted a paper shredder. I created a short video loop containing images from the revolution. Upside down in a headstand, I activated the shredder with my forehead, giving an illusion of the shredded paper coming out of my head, metaphorically cutting memories of the events I witnessed and experienced in December 1989.

In these two artworks, I placed myself in an *interstice*, between two national and artistic cultural worlds. This “interrogatory, interstitial space”⁴ is a place where I can reflect and detach myself from the world’s biases and gain a holistic perspective on my identity. The interstice is an open door—a niche—to my place in the art world.



Figure 1. Adrian Golban, *Emotional Baggage*, 2017. Mixed-media. Snelgrove Art Gallery, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.



Figure 2. Adrian Golban, *Emotional Regime*, 2016. Mixed-media, Installation/Performance. Snelgrove Art Gallery, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon campus.

I began the MFA program in the fall of 2018, and it affected me like medicine; it was the right place and time for me to recharge my batteries and update myself. The MFA meant two years of rigorous work and self-discovery, an opportunity to find my own voice. It gave me the chance to explore, to experiment, and to get lost. Being lost in the art world is a matter of happy chance. American writer Rebecca Solnit, paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, said that: “... to be lost

⁴ Marjorie Perloff, *Cultural Liminality / Aesthetic Closure?: The “Interstitial Perspective” of Homi Bhabha*. <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/perloff/bhabha.html>

is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery.”⁵ Therefore, I tried to step out of my old framework and reconsider my direction.

While my background training focused on an accumulation of skills—the knowledge of human anatomy and materials—in this program, I was confronting diverse approaches to art where the techniques are not necessarily a priority. Reading art writer Sarah Thornton’s account of art teaching at the California Institute of Arts, where the mantra is “no technique before need,”⁶ I was puzzled. I knew I possessed skills, but I did not know what to do with them anymore. I had to learn to detach myself from the formal and be more cerebral, to dig deep and determine my own voice. My past art training emphasized form, object, and expressiveness rather than context or idea, discontinuity or chance. My reflections had been about the materials I used, including experiments like carving and casting. I now understand that the “truth to materials” principle that British, modern sculptor Eric Gill refers to was “inextricably linked to modern abstract sculpture,”⁷ and it has contributed to the visual intelligence and aesthetic concerns I have accumulated. But in the MFA program, I could pursue an opportunity to begin afresh.

During the program, I was exposed to new contemporary art, as well as contemporary and conceptual art challenges—like using found objects and recycled materials that are ephemeral, temporary, or connected to memories. The ideas this material represents entered my vocabulary. My dual identities, both artistic and national, placed me in between two artistic contexts: the traditional world of the East European (post-communist) art community and the modernist and post-modernist art world of the West. My past training in formalist modernism had emphasized formal composition and “truth to materials,” but in the MFA program, I learned

⁵ Rebecca Solnit, “Open Door,” in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. (New York: Viking, 2005), 6.

⁶ Sarah Thornton, “The Crit,” in *Seven Days in The Art World*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company New York London, 2009), 52.

⁷ Jon Wood, David Hulks and Alex Potts, “Sculpture: An Essay 1918,” in *Modern Sculpture Reader*. (Henry Moore Institute, Leeds and the J, Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2012), 56.

that composition could be “one thing after another”⁸ while materials could be nonhierarchical (including even junk and consumer objects). My point is certainly not to dismiss either of these traditions, but to accept the fact that I am now aware of these influences and that I can choose to interlace both approaches in my art practice. Therefore, I decided to assume the role of a visual actor, a player, and freely jump from one idea to another to give me the satisfaction of the new and feed my curiosity about the unknown. During classes and studio experiments in the first year of my MFA program, I had opportunities to try out these new approaches. In experimental work, I incorporated found objects and photography into my projects. Some of these works included *The Sputnik*, *Inside of My Bicycle*, and *The Dog-Lamp*.

The Sputnik (Fig. 3) is an obsolete object—a bicycle similar to one I had as an adolescent, which triggers memories and brings new vocabulary to my artwork. Besides reminiscing nostalgically about this Russian brand of bicycle, which echoes my East European identity and the communist era I grew up in, I was fascinated by its antique, rusty patina. In its use of the bicycle as an object, *The Sputnik* was informed by Marcel Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel*⁹ and Ai Wei Wei’s *Forever Bicycles*.¹⁰ *The Sputnik* is also informed by the Deconstructivist movement in art, which foreshadows my current concerns with fragmentation and dislocation. *The Sputnik* investigates memory and nostalgia but with a familiar object: a real bicycle and its function. My artwork is an interrogation of these two possibilities. Metaphorically, the alteration of the bicycle predicts the dislocation and disconnection from the cultural references I refer to in my current work.

⁸ Rosalind Krauss, “The Double Negative: a new syntax for sculpture,” in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 244.

⁹ Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913. At the Duchamp Retrospective, Pasadena Art Museum, 1963. <https://www.hilton-asmus.com/julian-wasser-marcel-duchamp-bicycle-wheel.html>

¹⁰ Ai Weiwei, *Forever Bicycles*, 2015. Stainless steel bicycle frames. Courtesy Ai Weiwei and Lisson Gallery, London. <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4433/the-bicycle-as-dissident-object/>



Figure 3. Adrian Golban, *The Sputnik*, 2019. Found objects. Sculpture/Installation. Studio space view.

Inside of My Bicycle (Fig. 4), is an extension of *The Sputnik* in two dimensions. It explores the relationship between the bicycle's body parts and photography, specifically photograms, which, as I learned in one of my MFA studio classes, use historical photographic processes. With influences as diverse as Man Ray's *Rayographs* series¹¹ and Mike and Doug Starn's *Absorption of Light* series,¹² *Inside of My Bicycle* is a reflection of memories through

¹¹Man Ray, Untitled rayograph, 1922, Courtesy of Christie's, London, UK.
<https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/10-most-famous-rayographs-of-man-ray/>.

¹²Mike and Doug Starn, *Attracted to Light I*, 2002, sulfur-toned silver prints hand coated on Thai mulberry paper, 120 x 264 in. <https://www.516arts.org/exhibitions/starn-brothers-absorption-of-light>.

photography. The photogram method gives the fragments an X-ray-like impression, with the negative shadow image showing variation in tone depending on the fragment's shape. This image results in a more abstract reproduction. I chose the 8 x 8-inch print format to frame the randomness of the bicycle's fragments, a sort of controlled chaos. As a result, the nine images can be perceived as both a distinct composition and as separate, independent pieces. The images were developed with caffenol, a non-traditional developer based on household ingredients. This technique appeals to me because it is convenient and affordable and because I am fascinated by the simplicity of this historical process. The results have a remarkable plasticity and look like the patina on a traditional bronze sculpture or the weathered walls of an old Romanian building—an association I only became aware of after printing the images. These are likely unconscious visual influences from my past being reflected in my work.



Figure 4. Adrian Golban, *Inside of My Bicycle*, 2019. Photograms, caffenol developer. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.

Another artwork I completed at the end of my first year in the MFA program is *The Dog-Lamp* (Fig. 5). This work is a mix of found objects, a motion sensor, and a realistic wax-dog portraiture based on a private commission. To paraphrase Rosalind Krauss, it is a “surrealist-object(s),”¹³ born from a flash-vision I had while in the studio: a visual juxtaposition of the two objects, fragments of a completely separate material world, stored on the same table for months. I see a surreal and humorous similarity to Salvador Dali’s *Lobster Telephone*.¹⁴ My work is a mash-up of objects with artificial organisms. Unlike Dali in his work on *Lobster*, a cast plaster sculpture, I chose to work with wax because it can be transformed by the heat generated by the lamp’s light bulb. I link this concept to “theatricality” through the presence and participation of the viewer. Moreover, *The Dog-Lamp* evokes the “laws of chance,”¹⁵ being an assemblage of two separate objects, found and made—the lamp and the dog head—which came together in my mind in a flash of vision. This seemingly arbitrary association suggests Duchamp’s argument of the “resemblance between the made object and its maker”¹⁶ but without his intention of depersonalizing a work of art. In contrast, I believe that imagery has personal and historical meaning for art. I like playing with new visual vocabulary of found and made objects, considering contemporary meanings and creating novel forms to support and contribute to evolving interpretations.

¹³ Rosalind Krauss, “A Game Plan: the terms of surrealism,” in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 120.

¹⁴ Salvador Dali, *Lobster Telephone*, 1936. Surrealist object. National Galleries of Modern Art, Edinburgh, Scotland. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-46564867>.

¹⁵ Rosalind Krauss, “A Game Plan: the terms of surrealism,” 108.

¹⁶ Rosalind Krauss, “A Game Plan: the terms of surrealism,” 108.



Figure 5. Adrian Golban, *The Dog-Lamp*, 2020. Found object, wax, motion sensor. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.

4. *Interstice*, MFA Thesis Exhibition

In my final thesis exhibition, *Interstice*, I am presenting sculptural forms that allude to archeology both in materials and in presentation strategies. Concepts connected to archeology also interest me in this new work, which has developed from actual objects and memories from Romania, as well as from self-portraits that are assembled and fragmented. In my current work, I seek to reconnect with Romanian culture by using familiar objects and materials such as clay, wood, and a traditional mudbrick mixture to investigate identity in the cultural sense, from the standpoint of where I am now and where I came from. Thematically, I refer to cultural and artistic identities, conceivably because I am reluctant to sever the connection with either. Through this exhibition, I am reconsidering my direction through a personal (re)connection with my birthplace and my childhood, as well as with my previous artistic training and decades of working as an artist in Romania.

Since I settled in Canada in 2012, my artistic work has become a reflection of a time in a foreign space. I am aware of differences in Canadian and Romanian culture and customs, and admittedly, it was difficult for me to accept Canadian ways and to assimilate new, unfamiliar information. However, I now accept Canadian culture and principles as an extension of my own and have incorporated them into my life as an artist; but in embracing these new perspectives on life, I have filtered them. I am analyzing myself at the current moment from a physical and psychological perspective. How much have I changed since I came to Canada? How much has culture shock affected me? I ask myself these questions as I seek to understand the “new self” in the sense of self-recognition. Who am I in relation to this time and space, a foreign place that is becoming familiar to me? As immigrant Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan said, “When space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place.”¹⁷ Yet, at this moment in my life, I feel like I am in between two worlds, that I belong exclusively to neither Romanian nor Canadian cultures: I am in an *interstice*.

¹⁷ Tacita Dean and Jeremy Miller, “The First of all Things,” in *Art Works: Place*. Edited by Thames & Hudson Ltd, 14. London: 2005, 14.

4.1. *Objects-Talismen*

The objects presented in the showcase, *Objects-Talismen* (Fig. 6), are talismen. They are personal objects from my family, which contain memories that connect me with my childhood: the loom heddle, the wooden rake fragment, the painting roller, and the metal nails. These objects have meaning for me and are presented in an archeological manner, like relics in the showcase, as I am digging deep into my memories, feeding my present self and trying to preserve memories and my identity. These objects are kept “in between” non-art and art, at the border of the two. Neither art nor artefacts, the objects are personal belongings that have accompanied me on my artistic journey. I am not ready to either leave them or transform them into Duchampian ready-made objects. Art historian Penelope Curtis said that Duchamp: “... first used the term ‘ready-made’ himself in 1915 and later explained how difficult it was to approach something with indifference, as if you had no aesthetic emotion.” She added that the decision to use ready-mades is “always based on visual indifference and ... on the total absence of good or bad taste.”¹⁸ While I knew Duchamp’s association with the ready-made, during the MFA program I became aware of his influence among artists who evidently have followed in his footsteps. Like them, I have collected ready-made objects, now more commonly known in the art world as found objects. But I wondered how I would present *my objects* differently from others. I also contemplated what theory I should develop around them, perhaps as personal belongings or as *relics-talismen*. Unlike Duchamp’s “indifference,” my objects acquire a significance through their origin because they are associated with personal memory and emotion.

¹⁸ Penelope Curtis, “The Object: Function, Invitation and Interaction” in *Sculpture 1900–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 143–144.



Figure 6. Adrian Golban, *Objects-Talismen*, 2021. Loom heddle, fragment of wooden rake, and rusty nails. Personal collection of inherited objects.

4.2. *Present Self and Multiple Selves*

I have two distinctive approaches to making sculpture. One is the representational, academic method I learned during my training in Romania, where I strived to achieve perfection and to capture a likeness. The other is about intuition: having less control; relying on surprise, accident, and randomness; and showing tendencies towards the conceptual. These two methods are meeting now somewhere in my current practice, where they are merging and becoming a new pattern—my pattern.

The first approach is informed by my academic training, which focused on figurative and formal methods of making sculptures. I am still interested in using this method and trying to perfect it, pushing my own limits and being informed by contemporary figurative sculptors like Ron Mueck or Evan Penny. A realistic self-portrait realized in plasticine, *Present Self* (Fig. 7) captures me at the age of 53. Unlike Evan Penny's *Young Self, Old Self*,¹⁹ *Present Self* addresses how I look now at this moment. Do I recognize myself? Am I who I assumed I am? I like using my ability of reproducing what I perceive by observing and employing the prescriptive methods I developed over the years, long before the 3D printer and the laser scanner (which Evan Penny uses) entered art practice. Although I have not yet worked with a 3D printer, I believe that over-reliance on technology can result in the loss of natural abilities.



Figure 7. Adrian Golban, *Present Self*, 2021. Plasticine, foam, wood. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.

¹⁹ Evan Penny, *Young Self, Old Self*. A Portrait of the Artist.
<http://www.trepanierbaer.com/exhibition/evan-penny-young-self-old-self-a-portrait-of-the-artist/>.

My second method of making sculpture is both experimental and conceptual. My experiences and struggles over the years, along with my current status as student, immigrant, and artist, led me to question my identity, which is reflected in my current work. *Multiple Selves* (Fig. 8, 9), a series of self-portraits, investigates this inner turmoil by distorting my self-portraits. *Multiple Selves* neglects the anatomical details of *Present Self*, focusing more on the alteration created by experimentally mixing the clay with miscellaneous materials like coffee grounds, sawdust, wooden ash, and straw. These materials react during firing, introducing unexpected alterations to the finished pieces. I rely on firing accidents, with results that are dissimilar from piece to piece, depending on the specific material I added to the clay. In this manner, I present the work as a contemporary discourse, metaphorically revealing my disconnection, duality, and a distorted reality. Conceptually, *Multiple Selves* reflects personal internal burns that alter both the inner and the external image of self.



Figure 8. Adrian Golban, *Multiple Selves*, 2021. Cone 022, 015, 06 fired clay on sawdust, 12 x 84 x 84 in. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.



Figure 9. Adrian Golban, *Multiple Selves*, 2021. Cone 022, 015, 06 fired clay on sawdust. Detail.
University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.

4.3. *The Vessel of Thoughts* and *The Dacian* ²⁰

Another aspect of my work is the exploration of different approaches to conventional materials. In *The Vessel of Thoughts* (Fig. 10) and *The Dacian* (Fig. 11, 12), I use clay and wood to evoke a state of mind in a theatrical setup. These works communicate a personal experience based on imagination, process, and the relationship between the concept and representation. With each layer of wood, I present recent memories and memories from my past life. This combination of old memories and recent memories is auto-referential: a dialogue between material, form, and concept, with my cultural identity integrating time and space.

²⁰ “Contemporaries with the ancient Greeks and Romans, the Dacians, are the ancestors of the Romanians. They lived in the territory of nowadays Romania, mainly in Transylvania.” Transylvania World Association, accessed August 21, 2021, <https://www.transylvaniaworld.com/concepts/ancient-dacians.html>.

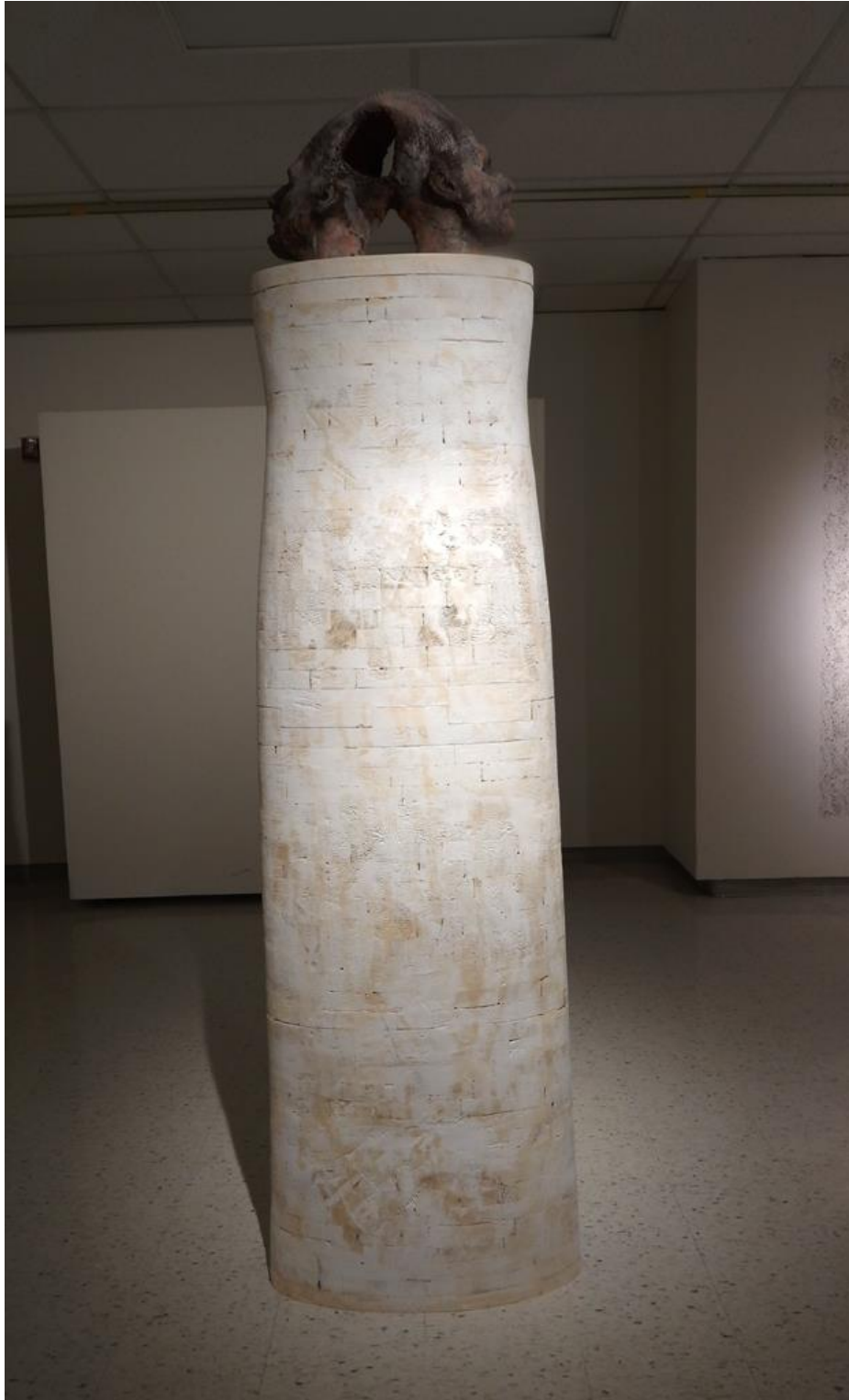


Figure 10. Adrian Golban. *The Vessel of Thoughts*, 2021 (work in progress). Wooden scraps and stoneware, 80 x 27 x 10 in.

The Vessel of Thoughts (Fig. 10) is informed by my earlier piece, *Emotional Baggage* (Fig. 1). Both works have to do with memories: cutting and storing them and, thus, emptying my mind of them. *The Vessel of Thoughts* is a vase filled with thought: I unburden my mind of all the prejudices and preconceived ideas about art I carry with me from my past training. I want to empty myself and make room for novelty, to recalibrate my vision about art and, as American author David James Poissant phrased it, “enjoy the emptiness in [my] head.”²¹ Poissant illustrates the meaning of this phrase in his short story “The Collector of Thoughts,”

Weeks, he’d been collecting his thoughts, and now he had them. They were caught in two suitcases, one flannel with a zipper, the other black with brass piping and buckles that clicked when they latched. The thoughts tumbled and bulged. They strained the sides of both bags. Day and night, the man had packed the suitcases, thought by thought, squeezing and cramming, then sitting on the lids until each one closed. Thoughts collected, he proceeded to enjoy the emptiness in his head. The emptiness was wonderful, like...well, the man couldn’t say what the emptiness was like exactly. Figurative language required association, association thought, and each of the man’s thoughts had been bundled and zippered and clicked.²²

Like the narrator in Poissant’s story, I wanted to banish the swarm of thoughts that invaded my mind with contradictions and debates about dual artistic identity and clear myself of all prejudices, art history, contemporary art trend influences to reflect on who I really am. *The Vessel of Thoughts* (Fig. 10) is meant to gather and seal off my thoughts, my memories. My intention is to free myself from too much judgment and enjoy—at least for a short period of time—the emptiness of the mind. In its form, *The Vessel of Thoughts* also alludes to an antique sarcophagus—the “eater of flesh.”²³ In my case, the vessel is the eater of *thoughts* that trouble me.

²¹ David James Poissant, “The Collector of Thoughts” in *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts*, Summer/Fall 2013. <http://gulfcoastmag.org/journal/25.2/the-collector-of-thoughts/>.

²² David James Poissant, “The Collector of Thoughts.”

²³ “Sarcophagus,” New World Encyclopedia, accessed August 21, 2021, <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Sarcophagus&oldid=682948>.

Both *The Vessel of Thoughts* and *The Dacian* allude to sarcophagi. Through *The Dacian* (Fig. 11, 12), I am identifying myself with my ancestry; or rather, I am seeking a reconnection with my Romanian ancestry. In contrast to *The Vessel of Thoughts*, which is a closed, compact form, *The Dacian* offers a view inside through the opening cut, an interstice in the wooden section up through the bust's head, like a tunnel absorbing the light. Metaphorically, I am enlightening myself about my cultural origins, reflecting the internal struggle in the roughness of the exposed wood. I have used ancestral materials: clay, for instance, first used in early Romanian culture in pottery, and wood used in the manufacture of tools and the construction of houses. More personally, I have used my father's house-painting rollers, imprinting their patterns on the clay surfaces as a way of marking my emotional memories. In *The Dacian*, I create my "self-definition" as an individual in relation to my cultural and national affiliation. I can choose to re-define my own artistic identity based on my background and ethnic identity and my current place "between two worlds."

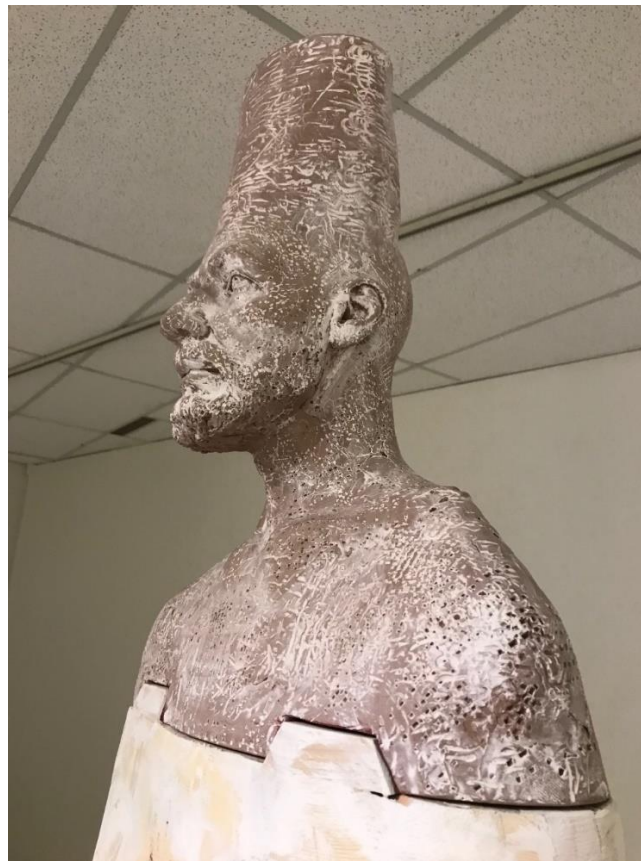


Figure 11. Adrian Golban, *The Dacian*, 2021. Stoneware and wooden scraps, 96 x 32 x 23 in. Detail. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.



Figure 12. Adrian Golban, *The Dacian*, 2021. Stoneware and wooden scraps, 96 x 32 x 23 in. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.

4.4. *Self-(Re) Built from Scraps*

In *Self-(Re) Built from Scraps* (Fig. 13), I stress the idea of self-dislocation from national and artistic cultures, attempting to reconstruct myself from memories. My past self is associated with traditions, confined by expectations and the environment I grew up in as an artist. The wooden scraps substitute for the plinth, dislocating the scraps' original form and function. The clay component of the work acts like a leitmotif—a repetition of self with abstract alterations, such as the open, vertical column on top of the head which allude to my aspiration for enlightenment and a release from the mind's games.



Figure 13. Adrian Golban, *Self-(Re) Built from Scraps*, 2021. Stoneware and wooden scraps, 96 x 10 x 10 in.
University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.

4.5. *The Self-Dislocated*

The Self-Dislocated (Fig. 14) underscores the emotional dislocation due to cultural displacement that I am exploring in *Interstice*. As American psychologist and psychoanalyst Karim D. Dajany explains, “Cultural dislocation—the removal of a person from a location organized by a particular set of cultural practices and placing them in another location organized by a substantially different set of cultural practices—can shock and alter the ego.”²⁴ Being in between two worlds, in an interstitial space, I can twist and turn unwelcome memories and use information extracted from both cultures—both national and artistic worlds—that can contribute to my current identity and comprise a creative space. As Indian English scholar and critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha would advise, I can give up being in opposition to either of the two worlds.²⁵ *Self-Dislocated*, like other works in *Interstice*, investigates the hypothesis of the self being dislocated from traditional beliefs and principles. To reinvent myself, I must free myself from my past, from the traditional history and teaching methods I used to be devoted to. This freeing of the self involves disrupting traditional approaches to art and takes place in a paradoxical “in between” space.

²⁴ Karim G. Dajani, *Cultural determinants in Winnicott's developmental theories*, *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, 10.1002/aps.1640, 17, 1, (2020), 6–21.

²⁵ Marjorie Perloff, *Cultural Liminality / Aesthetic Closure?: The “Interstitial Perspective” of Homi Bhabha*, <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/perloff/bhabha.html>.

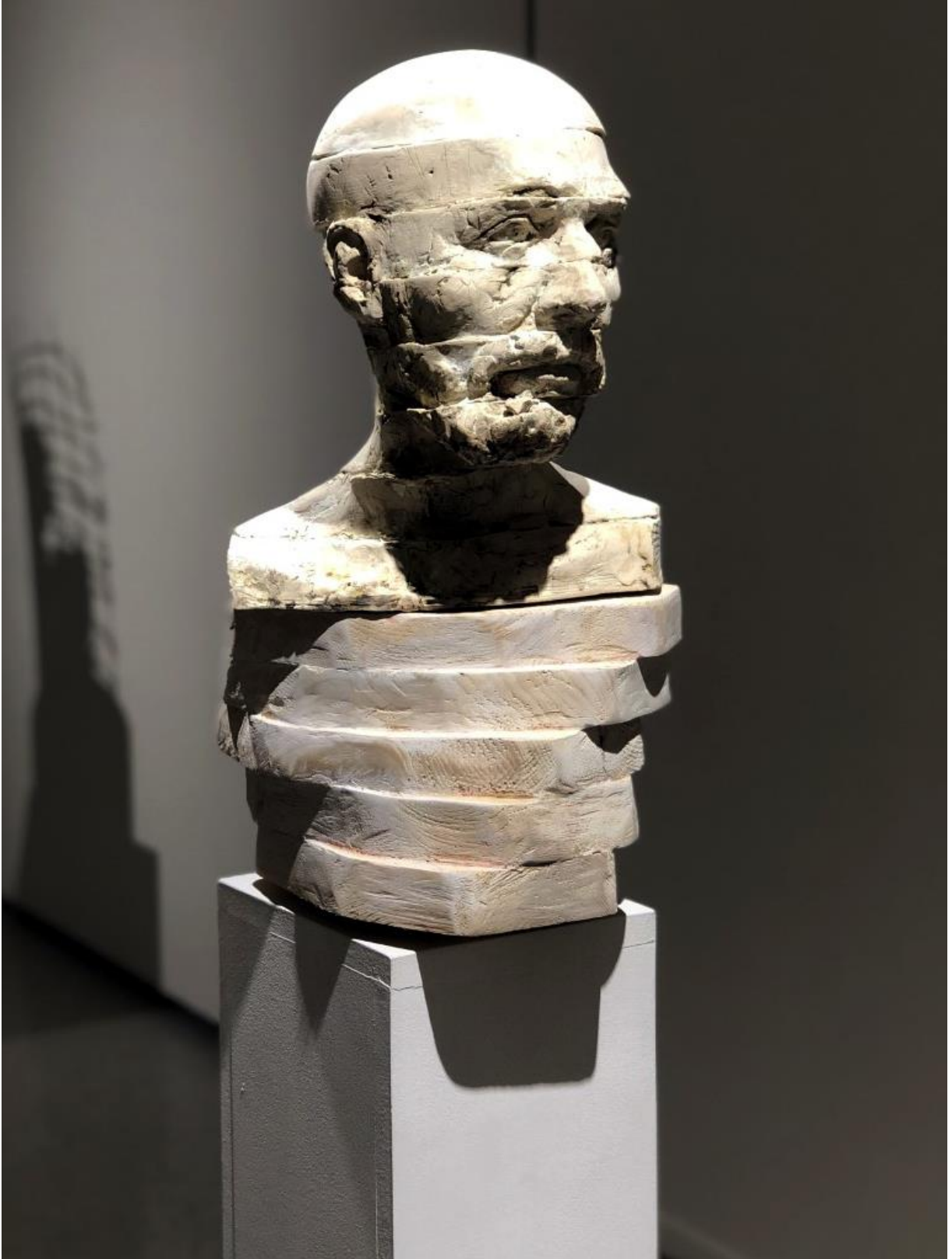


Figure 14. Adrian Golban, *The Self-Dislocated*, 2021. Stoneware and wood, 20 x 13 x 10 in. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus

4.6. *I am Ro-maniac: Refilling my Memories*

I am Ro-maniac: Refilling my Memories (Fig. 15,16), is a piece of imaginary furniture holding my head, metaphorically amputated from the memories of my past life, like a funnel symbolically refilling my memories. Like *The Dog-Lamp* (Fig. 5), this piece uses found and made objects: rusty metal table legs, the carved wooden element, the clay self-portrait, and the funnel resting on it. This work speaks about how since settling in Canada, my affiliation to Romanian culture has strengthened through the experience of culture shock. Ironically, now that my life is in Canada, I am obsessed with regaining my Romanian identity and recognizing Romanian culture. In an interstitial place, I can reflect on and recharge my Romanian self from a distance. Torn from Romania, I have rediscovered it through my own eyes and those of other Ro-maniacs, who, like me, are in love with those faraway lands.



Figure 15. Adrian Golban, *I am Ro-maniac: Refilling my Memories*, 2021. detail



Figure 16. Adrian Golban, *I am Ro-maniac: Refilling my Memories*, 2021. Found object, wood, and stoneware, 60 x 15 x 12 in. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.

4.7. *The Three Selves*

The *Three Selves* (Fig. 17) reveals the self-persona in relation to my dual identities. I am a son, a father, and an artist. Which one performs first or if there is any obstruction in between the three is a matter of circumstances. This social self-reference is intrinsically connected to memory and identity. Memories, for instance, provide me with an incentive for the self's quest. I recognize myself through my ethnic heritage and through familiar objects like my father's painting roller, which I used to create a decorative pattern on the wall of the gallery. These objects act as a passageway to my childhood. The *Three Selves* facing the decorated wall metaphorically reconnect the son, the father, and the artist at once, like time travel to a different time and space. Philosopher Philip Pettit classifies the "three selves" as the referenced self, personated self, and alienated self.^{26/27/28} These categories coexist with or without self-consent, and one of the three selves becomes dominant depending on the situation or external judgements. The way I perceive the world is different from how the world perceives me. In the *Three Selves* my current self-image—upside-down—merges from one to another, like a synergic manifestation of the three categories discussed by Pettit.

²⁶ Philip Pettit, "My Three Selves," in *Philosophy* 95, no. 3 (2020): 363-89. doi:10.1017/S0031819120000170.

²⁷ Philip Pettit, "My Three Selves." Royal Institute of Philosophy Annual Lecture 2019. Video, YouTube, accessed on July 31, 2021. min. 40:53–1:03:11.

²⁸ Philip Pettit "Lecture 5. Minds that speak constitute persons and selves," <https://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/files/2019johnlocke/lectures5personhoodhandoutpdf>.



Figure 17. Adrian Golban, *The Three Selves*, 2021. Stoneware, 24 x 10 x 13 in. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.

4.8. *The Mudbrick Relic*

Identity is the core concept that informs my artworks in *Interstice*. As I am an immigrant artist attempting to reconnect with my Romanian inheritance, my ethnic heritage plays a significant role in my art practice, now more than ever. *The Mudbrick Relic* (Fig. 18) uses wooden scraps, lilac flower twigs, mudbrick mixture of clay, straw and horse's manure, calcium carbonate, iron oxide, and the painting roller—all materials that connect me, as in *The Dacian* (Fig. 11, 12), with my Romanian ancestry and my childhood. As a child, I witnessed my father build our house from mudbricks. With *The Mudbrick Relic*, I am building a fragment of this memory for myself as a new structure of gathering experiences. *The Mudbrick Relic* is also informed by the artist Mark Manders' metaphorical leitmotif titled *Self Portrait as a Building: Tilted Head*,²⁹ an artwork that reassembled other works and concepts located in a room of a building (while Manders' larger body of work refers to a building, individual self-portraits are in a variety of postures such as the "tilted head"). To my understanding, this building is not only a physical structure; it is also the artist's inner building that keeps growing as it accumulates experiences. In the *Mudbrick Relic*, I was driven emotionally to use the specific materials that connect me with my childhood. This work was also informed by Italian Futurist Umberto Boccioni's idea of "breaking down the 'homogeneity of materials,'" ³⁰ as he proclaims in his 1912 Manifesto: "The sculptor can use twenty different materials ... in a single work, provided that the plastic emotion requires it."³¹ Following Boccioni's example, I mixed "diverse material truths" ³² in the *Mudbrick Relic*, which allowed me to reconsider my "truth to materials" approach to traditional sculpture.

²⁹ Jonathan Goodman, "Mark Manders: Title Head" in *Sculpturenature*, September 2019, <https://www.sculpturenature.com/en/mark-manders-sculpture-new-york-tilted-head/>.

³⁰ Penelope Curtis. "Direct Expression through the Material" in *Sculpture 1900–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 100.

³¹ Penelope Curtis. "Direct Expression through the Material," 100.

³² Penelope Curtis. "Direct Expression through the Material," 100. (Note: subtitled "Mixing diverse material truths").

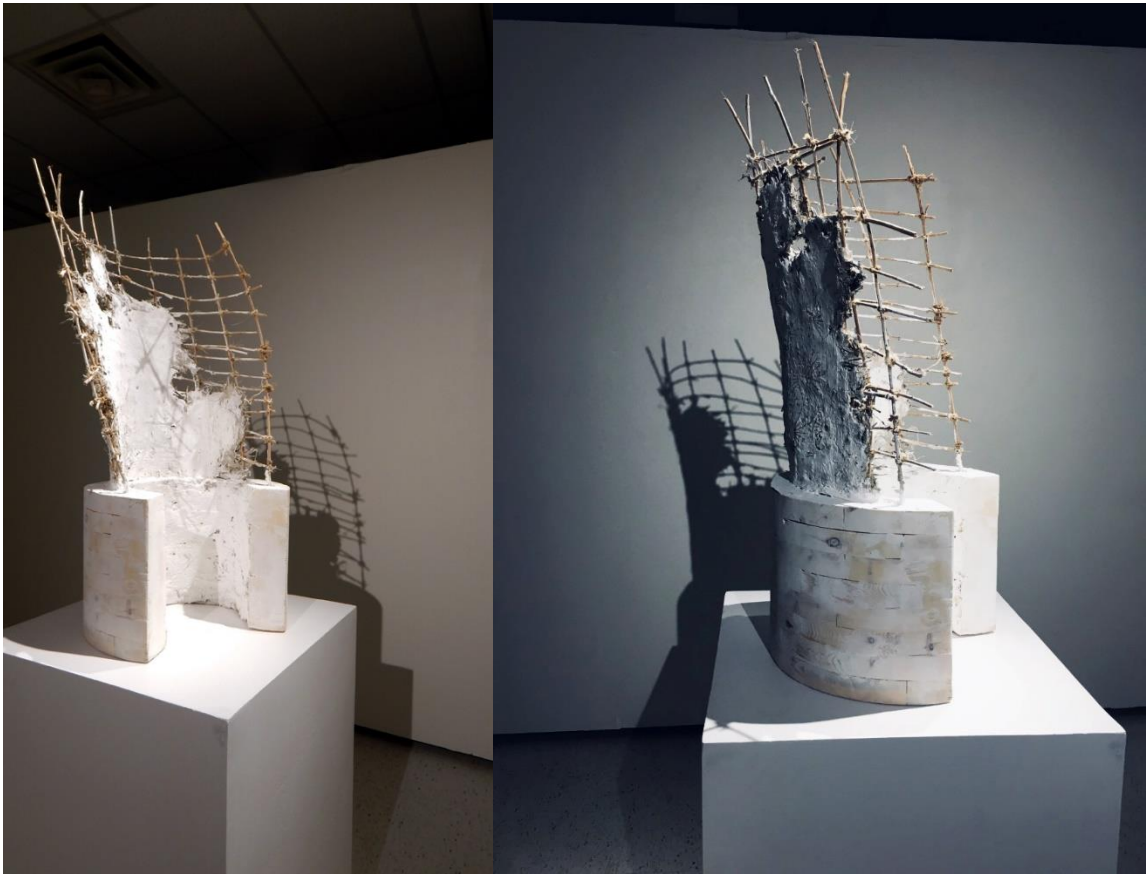


Figure 18. Adrian Golban, *The Mudbrick Relic*, 2021. Branches, mudbrick, calcium carbonate, red iron oxide.
University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.

5. Conclusion

Since enrolling in the MFA program, I have experienced a sense of distance from my earlier training and traditional forms of sculpture. Now, I understand and respect this distance as informed by the place and time in which I lived. I have engaged with the influences of my new culture and the art directions I was exposed to in the MFA program, which inform the art direction I now explore. Through *Interstice* I am investigating myself in relation to the past and the present, examining my dual identities as both an artist and immigrant. What I have gained in the MFA program is the courage and the energy to experiment with alternative directions, to “get lost and find myself.” I have become aware of who I am, and I am attentive to this enormous maze that is the art world in which I have placed myself. *Interstice* speaks about the gap between my two worlds: the traditional art world in which I had immersed myself in Romania and the contemporary art world where I found myself in North America. I sank into this gap, fed myself from both worlds, and *(Re) Built* myself from scraps.

Deep in the *Interstice*, I reconnected with my *Dacian* ancestry; I identified with my ancestors then put myself in their skin. In the *Interstice*, I lived in a *Mudbrick* shelter (relic-like) to defend myself from the world’s influences or judgements; I lived like a retreating monk, meditating, and materializing my thoughts. For me, living in between two worlds has been like living in between two artistic boundaries and trying to free myself and move beyond them. Now I have come to the surface, ready to encounter the challenges of the world. I am over here in the *Interstice* at the Snelgrove Art Gallery, present in each work on display.

Adrian Golban

August 23, 2021

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada

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Appendix

INTRERSTICE, Snelgrove Art Gallery Installation View September, 2021.







